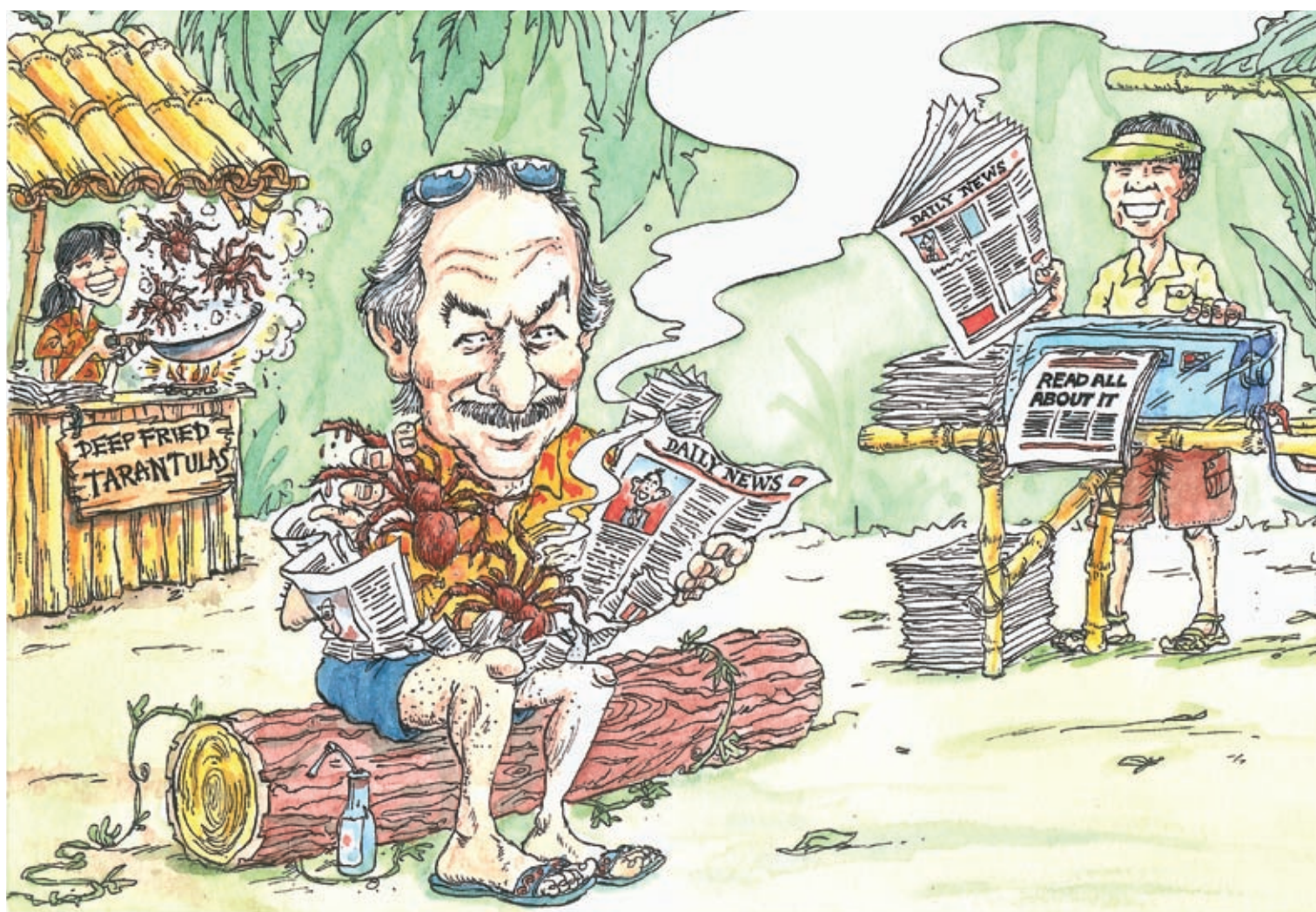




RANTS & RAVES

Mel Croucher revels in a technological development that's good news for everyone but fish and chip shop owners. Simon Edwards, however, is in a state of denial about his computer addiction

PAPER TIGERS



MEL CROUCHER RAVES

There is a big metal filing cabinet in the offices of *Computer Shopper*, filled with serried ranks of every issue of this magazine. It stands against the far wall like a totemic god, and many staff members scrape and bow before it on bended knee as they go about their rituals of magazine worship.

Magazines are glorious, precious things. They are for collecting, indexing, consulting, sharing and, in my case, fondling and sniffing. Newspapers, on the other hand, are for wrapping fish and chips in, or picking up dog poo. Unlike magazines, newspapers are

ephemeral. We use them and lose them. Unless their content is consumed fresh, they go off. Like several other diurnal habits, newspapers can be addictive. Some people like their daily newsprint fix on the train or in the pub. I like my newspaper at the breakfast table. Which used to mean that when I was in far-flung places, I missed my favourite journalists, commentators and reviewers. But all that's changed.

SUPPLY AND DEMAND

I first encountered newspapers-on-demand in Cambodia. We were three hours from the nearest city, there was no mains electricity, another landmine had gone off, a woman was selling deep-fried tarantulas and I was reading a fresh copy of my daily paper. A single

copy had been conjured up for me, downloaded by an enterprising geezer from the village, and printed off on a dust-proof unit connected to a truck battery.

This was more than a new cottage industry: this was the start of a media revolution. I wasn't depriving the publisher of a purchase as I couldn't buy my regular newspaper anyway. No, I was enforcing my brand loyalty.

The leaders in this new market offer a choice of 300 newspapers in 30 languages. Their services are being taken up by hotels, airlines and cruise ships, but street kiosks can't be far behind. Print-stations consist of a standard digital printer, a PC and an internet connection, but it doesn't take a genius to figure out that once the day's

papers have been downloaded, the same files can be distributed all over town before breakfast. So my battery-powered Cambodian chum can tap in to the opportunity, too.

Although print is currently restricted to A3 paper, I can attest to the fact that the quality of a laser-printed edition is better than the traditional smeary newsprint. The daily newspaper industry is about to be transformed, and publishers need to recognise the biggest revolution since Gutenberg. Here is my raving vision.

GREEN DAYS

Newspapers-on-demand will help the environment, saving on transport, distribution, delivery, returns and pulping unsold copies. Pay-per-page will be customised to individual tastes to make further savings, because some people only/never read the sports pages, fashion items, political editorials, gossip columns and so on.

The flipside is that traditional papers are limited by space, but newspapers-on-demand are not, and will offer oodles of background information, loads more photos and specialist archive material.

And I haven't forgotten the *raison d'être* of the daily paper:



advertising revenue. Adverts will henceforth be close-targeted to the interests, status and location of the individual reader. Chips or dog poo? It's your choice.

GETTING A FIX



"You're addicted to that bloody machine!" ranted my mother in the early 1980s. The source of her enmity was a ZX Spectrum 48K, which my brother and I fought over constantly for about five years. Eventually it was stolen by burglars. While we were upset, I don't remember any harrowing withdrawal symptoms.

The thieves were clearly not computer addicts either, because they ditched the Speck in a nearby hedge. Dented and damp, the recovered computer gave further loyal service for another year or so before dying, or so we were told.

Addictions can be drug-related but addiction is often a term used to describe behaviour that appears obsessive. People who make accusations of addiction rarely understand the subject of this deep

interest, and it doubtless scares them silly to see a person completely absorbed in something so alien to them.

I personally don't participate in online chat forums and, when I see evidence of people spending hours chatting to each other on the web about science fiction or guns, subjects that hold no interest for me, my first response is to think, "Addicts. Sad, sad addicts." Then I log on and spend hours playing with Linux servers.

At the time of my Spectrum's mini adventure, every newspaper and computer magazine featured stories about computer addiction. There was even a Hollywood film, *Wargames*, that depicted Matthew Broderick as a computer-addicted kid who nearly starts World War III, accidentally, by playing a computer game on a military computer.

In the 1980s, if little Johnny took an interest in games or programming, he could well be considered an addict, unable to control the time spent in front of a flickering TV set, his fingers stabbing inefficiently at poorly made rubber keys. With ergonomics like that, you'd have to be sick in the head to stand more than half an hour. Who could have guessed that, 20 years on, computers would be important and little Johnny could end up a software developer earning £70K and driving a Jag? Or a computer hack.

FANTASY WORLD

The mainstream media loves addiction. While Little Johnny was losing his eyesight staring at terribly rendered graphics, local TV news stations got worked up about children becoming addicted and disturbed by *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D) and *Fighting Fantasy* books. The latter, created by Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone, were incredibly popular novel-sized books that allowed readers to navigate a fairly linear adventure game, fighting monsters and other nasties using weapons and magic spells.

The beasts were illustrated with (not very) scary black-and-white line drawings, and your real weapons were two standard dice. BBC South West ran a news item about the *Talisman of Death* title, claiming that an illustration had deeply upset a child. Other children were allegedly addicted. Some religious magazines claimed that D&D was akin to playing with Ouija boards. Somehow most of us made it to adulthood without joining a death cult.

But still the addiction stories continue. Internet addiction is a common claim, with freaks reportedly spending hours at a time

surfing the web or playing in massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs). Sometimes until they fall down dead, in real life. Of course, it's the fault of the games/porn industries rather than any inadequacies in the victims' lives. Johnny is a grown man, and is still ruining his eyes, but with more realistic graphics.

KEY BORED

The amount of time that we normal folks spend using the computer and the internet is still considerable, particularly when compared with five years ago. Not only are many of us chained to PCs during the working day, but banking, shopping, holiday booking and research and even betting are all commonly done online in 2006. Are we addicts if we spend 12 hours at a keyboard, or have computers and the internet become a part of normal life?

Queuing in the bank at lunchtime is a 'popular' activity that can take a long time, so are the crowds of people who do it every month bank addicts? Few would dare claim that commuting was an addiction, despite the fact that many of us spend hateful hours doing it each day. Some of us even use computers at the same time, to ease the gnawing sense that our lives are leaking away as we sit on stained seats in hot, crowded carriages.

People who have to deal with computers a lot are not computer addicts. We have to use the internet because, in some cases, there really is no viable option and, in others, it's simply much more convenient. It's progress, and as long as you can decide to do non-computer things every so often you're OK. The next time you see a scary computer addiction news story in the papers, just relax and remember that it's better to be banking online than waiting in line. However, if you read the news using a PDA in the bath, well, that's a different story.

WHAT NOT TO BUY



I was going to write a Rave about how brilliant computers are, but I've lost confidence in my considered opinions. You see, I've recently met someone who knows a lot more than me about technology. So, to ensure you get the best information (and to save me an afternoon of writing), I'll pass the rest of this page over to Brian Gorse, a man you probably know, if by another name...

You after a new car, are you? I bought a motor a few years ago. I like it, not least because I invested a considerable sum and I'm not likely to have done so without believing it was a good deal, I can tell you. It is good and reliable. Get one of those.

My laptop is the same. I chose it based on a number of factors, including its processor speed, price, weight and appearance. It works well and I'm satisfied with it. My phone, electric guitar, personal video recorder and MP3 player are excellent, too. Buy the same ones.

I'm telling you this, not to show off about what fantastic chattels I use to distract me from the vast hollowness of my futile existence, but to recommend each and every product to you. They work and I like them, but then I am a biased owner.

I am a biased owner who believes that my single personal experience outweighs the opinions of experts who have examined loads of cars, guitars, MP3 players and mobile phones using controlled and objective tests. Don't listen to scientifically researched reviews of anti-virus software in Computer Shopper (don't see page 129); use AntiVir Deluxe 0.01 instead. That's what I've installed and it's never missed a single virus, as far as it's possible for me to tell, considering I'm not a human virus scanner.

That laser printer you were thinking of buying, the one those idiots at Shopper told you was the best value? Forget it. Buy the PrintyQuik 6000ixc, like what I've got. In my wholly limited experience the prints look good. No, I don't know how they actually compare to prints from other printers, and I've not considered the long-term running costs. I'm happy with the results and that should be good enough for you, Sonny Jim.

The thing is, I know that the HP printer got a better review than my PrintyQuik, and that Kaspersky Anti-Virus did better than the horribly expensive and hard-to-use anti-virus software I was suckered into buying. But I have my pride and, should a computer magazine have the audacity to contradict my poorly researched views, I would rather argue blind that I am right rather than face the possibility that I've made a poor buying decision.

If you need any further advice, you can find me in the local hostelry. You'd be amazed how many people will listen to me and rate highly my unique take on the pros and cons of sat nav systems, PDAs and wireless ADSL modems. And with Carling Black Label (the only lager worth drinking) at £2.35 a pint, I'm much cheaper than a copy of your favourite but flawed computer magazine. ☑